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## Schools as Catalysts for Healthy Communities

### SYNOPSIS

Four school superintendents with a shared commitment to students' needs were able to forge a coalition that brought positive change to an entire region. Helping students and their families was a rallying issue for all community agencies. Initially, the four districts joined to apply for grant funding to link schools and social services providers. This served as a model and catalyst for many other cooperative community efforts.

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Seven years ago, a group of four reform-oriented superintendents, myself among them, gathered around a table in the Puget Sound area of Washington state. Each of us proudly revealed our respective districts' plans to pursue competitive state-level grants for school-community partnerships. These grants were focused on achieving better coordination of community services to student families, since we superintendents were all struck by the alarming rate at which schools were providing referrals for families and children in need of services. Demographic changes were producing districts with all the traits of "urbanized suburbia": increases in poverty, weak family structures, unemployment, mental and physical health needs, gangs, and increased crime.

Each superintendent firmly believed that until family and community social structures were strengthened, the schools could only make marginal academic gains with these students in need of services. Therefore, all four superintendents had met with their local social service providers and

enlisted them as co-sponsors of their grant proposals. As the plans were shared, it slowly dawned on us that we were in competition with each other for the same pot of grant funds, and that only one of us—at most—would succeed!

## A PARADIGM SWITCH TO THINKING REGIONALLY

The tenor of the meeting went from high-pitched laughter and enthusiasm to a somber state of reflection. We were all competitive beings, and our respective boards and communities expected each of us to win in these situations and to distinguish our district over neighboring districts. But we had begun to see ourselves in each other's eyes, and the 110,000 students we served collectively all seemed worthy of these opportunities. We talked about a new sense of equity that would serve students and families in need across all of our districts.

Then came the “eureka” moment: Why not propose a regional collaborative, with all of our social service providers in tow? Could we convince our staffs and service providers to switch strategies at this late date? Could we convince our boards that leverage was better than competition?

Those initial conversations weren't easy, since our competitive cultures were set and most participants in the system were not accustomed to a change such as this one. In *The Fifth Discipline*, author Peter Senge explains that this is because we are not “close in time and space” to obvious symptoms of the problem.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it might seem that we were creating a larger regional entity, more isolated in time and space from our local problems. In Senge's metaphor of a large ship with trim tabs guiding the rudder, the students became the trim tabs, turning the cumbersome community systems around until they aligned with students as the central focus. This is counterintuitive to anyone who doesn't understand the forces of hydrodynamics.

We gradually came to understand the forces at play in our school districts and made a commitment to “boundary-less” community services with equal access for all and a commitment to involvement of students across the entire system. We were all convinced that this approach could lead to collective wins as outlined in our joint proposal. Less than two weeks later, we emerged with a

united proposal. We did not realize at the time that by this action we were forever changing the nature of our school-community partnerships.

Our collective rationale:

- We held a powerful, shared vision of healthy students, schools and communities, and we were interested in leveraging our individual initiatives and resources to improve our collective results.
- We began to understand that we were all jointly responsible for serving students and families in need, and that we needed to employ joint strategies of accountability and coordinated resources to the public we serve.
- The social needs of our students and families are not self-contained within district boundaries. Provider services flow across district, county and town boundaries; this grant would for the first time honor this “natural” provider system.
- All students and families in need across the four districts could now obtain access to social services provided within any one of the districts. This would result in a richer selection of services for all in the region.
- We were proposing a concept that no one of us could achieve solo; it was truly mutually beneficial and interdependent.
- Financially, we could all win funds by collaborating and asking for more money than we could as individual districts, emphasizing the larger group of service providers across several counties.
- By trying to win something together rather than competing against one another, we were sending a powerful message about collaboration and equity to 111,000 students, 3,500 teachers, and 60,000 families.
- We wanted to break through the turf wars for clients among social service providers and show how leveraging resources brings greater gains to all parties. Even

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county officials began to recognize that they needed to make their administrative jurisdictions flexible to communities of shared interests, such as ours.

The results were dramatic. Instead of one district winning \$250,000, the collaborative group of four districts was awarded \$1.2 million, with an additional \$400,000 of in-kind services added by our local service providers. They began to understand how this regional approach would allow them to achieve their goals as they never had before.

After this win, we began to inspire others to join the effort. We opened dialogues with county, state, and national officials and were able to convince them to accommodate our project by breaking the traditional geographical boundaries and procedures of funding in order to support our project as a community of shared interest. In essence, we formed a large, comprehensive system of support around the goal of healthy students. This emergent system is described later in this article.

#### UNDERSTANDING MEANS AND ENDS

This story illustrates the interdependent relationship between means and ends, depending on one's perspective within the system. The school people see the student at the center of a healthy community, capable of higher academic achievement only if his or her social needs are met. For educators, creating a healthy community is a means to the desired end: a happy, productive, well-nurtured student.

As a small group of education leaders, we realized that our student-centered efforts had the power to leverage the entire system of health, social service, recreational, religious, governmental, community, and legal entities. Nothing was out of reach or impossible, and our growing network of creditable supporters became the lever that brought more supporters into the effort. The student became the eye of the needle through which all other institutions were threaded. We had empowered ourselves to draw in new partners who could not deny that their vision included quality of life and productivity for students and their families.

One superintendent plainly stated, "Had we started out with the goal of creating healthy communities, we would have garnered lackluster support. It seemed too big, or abstract, and it had too many things that were wrong, as evidenced by reading just one short week of local newspapers. The reality of it becomes depressing, since no one can imagine fixing all parts of the system that are broken. But with students at the center, people get it, and the system adapts itself to show results around students. Everyone can imagine improving the life of students, because they have all been there."

The National Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities (CHCC) holds a holistic, community-centered perspective, with healthy schools as one important condition among many others, such as: lifelong learning

and skill-building opportunities, safe and adequate housing, recreation and culture, public safety, youth mentoring, volunteerism, a healthy workplace, jobs that pay a living wage, nonprofit organizations, healthy promotion and prevention services, a vibrant faith community, effective media, good government, and effective transportation options.

The Coalition's overarching goal of healthy cities and communities translates directly to an improved quality of life for everyone. But this process requires a local group, such as the four superintendents, to catalyze the efforts. The system pieces will coalesce around the effort naturally.

Whether the effort begins with schools or community agencies is not important. What is important is a shared goal and vision that motivates people to act with conviction in home, school and community.

#### THE NEW SYSTEM GROWS AND ADAPTS

Once our initial collaborative committee was formed and resources and ideas were jointly coordinated, we began to extend the system we created to include youth groups, churches, and civic and cultural groups. We diversified the effort, but we remained focused on the shared goals. Although we began to pursue state and national initiatives, such as Medicare reimbursement

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for referral and treatment of certain eligible students and their families. We won more state and national grants, often on the strength of our track record of partnerships. We learned the simple lesson of how leveraging begets more leveraging, and the resources, energy, and partnerships grew. These efforts generated ongoing financial support for some of the joint efforts funded by the original grant.

At the same time, the four superintendents chose to formalize a relationship with New American Schools (NAS), a corporate nonprofit board formed to advance comprehensive school reform models nationally.<sup>2</sup> We were seeking a philosophical umbrella that would validate our newly created, shared model of leadership, leveraging, and systemic change.

We immediately worked with our individual communities on a five-point reform agenda that each district embraced and customized to its own local needs and priorities. The model called for the improvement of student learning through standards-driven curricula and assessment; the use of technology as a student productivity tool to promote meaningful learning; a series of social service initiatives focused on creating healthy students and families (both physically and emotionally); and district goals aimed at a high level of public engagement and participatory governance.

As we educated our respective district communities and asked them to define and prioritize this agenda, some new, unexpected systems emerged. We became much more familiar with the reform efforts within each district, and we began to see our strengths and weaknesses more clearly and less defensively. In essence, we began to see the four districts as one big system.

We created a leadership superstructure consisting of the most talented leaders in each shared goal area: curriculum, assessment, technology, student health and social services, and public engagement. This meant that the most talented people got the job, regardless of which district they were from, and that their job was serving in a leadership capacity to all four districts. This arrangement broke the mold of prior personnel agreements and con-

tracts and signaled to the staff that we were serious about the collaborative nature of our efforts.

## STUDENT-CENTERED RESULTS

Our student-centered model began to pay off in ways we had not even imagined. In my district, the newspaper headlines read "Students Excel" as our test scores rose despite our demographic challenges. But most impressive was the community-oriented work that students began producing and the dramatic increase in the number of engaged community members in both academic and social projects. In essence, the students leveraged themselves into meaningful community work, building on the momentum of the positive system changes modeled for them by adults. The students began to give back to the community that created them.

A few examples:

- One district instituted a requirement for 60 hours of community service as a high school graduation requirement. Students approved this requirement and took on meaningful, socially oriented projects throughout the community.
- Elementary students developed projects to revive salmon spawning in plugged-up streams, volunteered to teach retirees about computers, and created a Chamber of Commerce publication offering basic information about social service and recreational agencies in the area.

• A group of students lobbied the legislature to allocate funds for technology in classrooms across the state, particularly in communities in which local levies were not available.

• The combined academic, health, and social programs began to show positive achievement gains by the third year of the project. This was particularly impressive in light of the increased number of students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, non-English-speaking students, and students with special needs.

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It was not unusual to find our projects mentioned in state and national publications. *Education Week* featured us in a detailed story. We were featured on National Public Radio, in Apple computer media stories, in the proceedings of professional education organizations, and in a nationally broadcast special program produced by the George Lucas Foundation. The emphasis of these stories was always on the educational benefits of systemic reform, in terms of student learning. Interestingly, none of the stories chose to emphasize the creation of healthy communities through our student-centered focus, but that was where our vision began.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Others may benefit from the lessons we learned, which included:

- The way a project starts has everything to do with how it turns out. Our project started with four superintendents whose authentic, shared goals about students served as a powerful lever to move the group from competitive to collaborative thinking.
- Improving the opportunities for students to learn unfettered by health and social problems is a concrete goal that inspires many community partners.

- Work that raises a social and community conscience around students quickly expands to many other civic and quality-of-life issues. The students become the lever into a broader community.
- The scale-up is rapid. Initial efforts leverage into larger efforts with collaboration; then powerful, momentum-building alliances and partnerships begin to form.
- Once momentum is built, everyone wants to own it. Even school board members who normally would have objected to sharing agendas and personnel across districts became staunch supporters. They saw the powerful partners combined with positive student results.

As four superintendents, we learned a dramatic lesson from this experience, that students and schools can be the key to creating healthy communities.

### References

1. Senge P. *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday; 1990.
2. Bodilly SJ, Purnell SW, Ramsey K, Keith SJ. *Lessons from New American Schools Development Corporation's demonstration phase*. Santa Monica (CA): Rand Publication; 1996. ■